

HUGH MACKAY: How will widespread social isolation change us?

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Social isolation is hardly a new problem for us: it has been high on the list of concerns for social scientists and health professionals for many years. But the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing us to confront the potential for loneliness on an unprecedented scale.

Before the pandemic hit, we were already becoming a more fragmented society as a result of such radical changes as our rapidly shrinking households (25% of households now contain just one person), our high rate of relationship breakdown (35-40% of contemporary marriages will end in divorce), and our increasing reliance on information technology – especially social media – at the expense of face-to-face interactions. Even our relentless busyness acts like a barrier to social cohesion.

Like all herd animals, humans react badly to being cut off from the herd. Social isolation is associated not only with a greater risk of anxiety and depression but also with increased inflammation, reduced immune function, hypertension, cognitive decline, sleep disturbances, addiction (especially to IT devices), and premature death. It's no wonder that some health professionals now regard social isolation as a potentially greater threat to public health than obesity is.

As we begin to experience social isolation on a massive scale, we need to be sure we are not trading one form of illness for another. "Social distancing" is an unfortunate term. Yes, we must maintain some *physical* distance from each other but, precisely for that reason, our need for social connection is stronger than ever.

The complication, this time, is that we can't reach out to each other in the normal way. But that only increases the need for us to look for creative ways of ensuring that no one in our street, or in our wider networks, feels lonely, even if they are alone.

Working from home, for instance, doesn't have to imply emotional isolation: you can still phone your colleagues for the kind of inconsequential chat you might normally have during a coffee break. Zoom meetings can be very productive when they are well run. Many teachers, of all kinds, are continuing their classes online.

Locally, we can write little notes (remember them?) to our neighbours, assuring them that we are here if they need any help. We can call, text and email each other more often than usual – not for any reason other than to stay in touch. (That's already happening, often with a more caring tone than usual.) Many of us will have time on our hands: perhaps this is the moment for nurturing neglected relationships.

The current news is all bad (and likely to get worse: predictions of more domestic violence, more relationship breakdowns and more suicides are probably accurate). But, in small ways, we can create our own "good news". Wave. Smile. Greet people across the fence or across the street. If someone in your street is having a birthday, get a few neighbours to stand in their front yard and sing. Pick some lemons or flowers and drop them off on the doorstep of someone in your street at risk of loneliness.

At a time when we're understandably anxious about the effects of social isolation on ourselves, it's easy to forget that many members of our community have been suffering the effects of social isolation for years: people with special needs, their carers, single parents, the long-term unemployed, people living with mental illness, the cognitively impaired, refugees, the homeless,

students living far from home, the frail elderly living alone. Perhaps the pandemic will sharpen our awareness of their needs and inspire us to be more responsive.

We humans are a complex blend of the rational and the irrational; the noble and the downright stupid. In a crisis, we can behave well and badly, sometimes on the same day. Initially, talk of the coronavirus engendered such fear and anxiety that many of us yielded to blind panic: people were fighting over toilet rolls in supermarket aisles all over the world, not just here.

But pandemics are such a potent sign of our interconnectedness and interdependency, they remind us that sustainable communities depend on a steady supply of compassion to nurture them. Longer term, major disruptions like this one tend to bring out the best in us, so we are entitled to hope for some overdue corrections to our mad materialism and our unhealthy individualism.

There are likely to be other corrections, as well. Our tarnished institutions have been given an opportunity to restore some of the public trust they have lost. If banks can be sensitive, accommodating and flexible in their dealings with customers struggling through a prolonged period of unemployment, we will respect them more than would have seemed possible even twelve months ago.

It will not be surprising if, in the wake of the pandemic, the decline in church attendance is modestly reversed as more people seek the emotional support of local faith communities, and the uplift of faith itself.

If the mainstream media emerge as more reliable, restrained and truthful than the stories running wild on social media, we may turn to them again as credible authorities. (Some newspapers' sales are already rising.)

And politics? On the national stage, we have witnessed another display of fumbled leadership, with protective measures only gradually being introduced long after many medical professionals had called for them. Our resulting confusion and disappointment will only reinforce our misgivings about the state of federal politics. By contrast, our renewed respect for state and territory leaders will silence any talk of abolishing the states for at least another generation.

There's also likely to be a transformation in our appreciation of the importance of local neighbourhoods and communities, and our responsibility to engage kindly and compassionately with them. In a crisis, that's always where immediate help is to be found.

This pandemic will end. If, on its way through, it bolsters our sense of interdependency, that might be some consolation. By compounding the shock of the recent bushfires, it might even galvanise us into more urgent action to address the impact of climate change.

Meanwhile, at least we're becoming a nation of well-washed hands.

By Hugh Mackay

Taken from John Menadue, *Pearls and Irritations*